

Bulgarian Folk Costumes – Symbols and Tradition



Bulgarian Folk Costumes – Symbols and Tradition



**BULGARIAN
DIPLOMATIC
REVIEW**

We can understand a given nation only by studying its means of communication and the messages that they carry. The end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th c. is a turning point for clothing in Europe. In Western Europe fashion was born from the competition between aristocracy and city bourgeoisie. Bulgarian society and the traditional costumes follow different rules of development completely untouched by this fashion. Much later and much slower, at the end of the 19th c. this society is subject to external influence and to the first trends of fashion. This is a fact, which has its explanation also in the symbolic function of dresses. In Bulgarian tradition the separate parts of the costume – shirt, girdle, belt, apron, shoes, head decorations and so on, are used for initiating, keeping up and disrupting communication. They function as family and age signs and their combination through the centuries carries both everyday information and the idea of a specific ritual or custom. Each of the elements, especially in the female costumes, preserves a generalized knowledge about the world or is used for magic effects. Traditional beliefs allow for “dangerous zones of the body” to transmit other worlds of good or evil to the human being. For that purpose there are various means for limiting or avoiding the situation. The fabrics and the dresses, worn as cultural instructions, offer means of control over such events with unpredictable results.

From the moment of his self-awareness, i.e. his separation from nature, man tries to set limits and to secure himself in some closed space. This is achieved by layers in the horizontal level of the construction of the traditional costume: internal – hemp (linen) shirt / external – woolen overdress / final external – leather dress (or decoration). While the form of the shirt united the clothes used (shirt, underwear and over wear), they coincide or come out of the other, the materials form, which they are made (linen-wool-leather) oppose them in a categorical way. Each one of the materials demonstrates the process of their gradual introduction by man – from the first leather clothing through the woolen dresses to those of plant origin. The newer (cleaner or more cultural layer) remains closer to the body. In the same time they represent also traditional concepts, varying from the idea of leather as the chthonian, of the opposition of processed wool and animal fur or the fiber of flax, related to the heavenly.

The Bulgarian female traditional costume follows the tunic-like form of the shirt, which on its part has been used for so many centuries and preferred till the beginning of the 20th c., when fundamental changes



in the way of dressing set in. Made of different materials, with duplication in form, put one over the other (one into the other) the clothes build up in a strict, obligatory and unchangeable order the horizontal structure of the costume. It includes the complete set of clothes and signifying by means of it is a basic right and obligation of the young married woman. For a definite period of time after the wedding, most often until St. George day (May 6) or harvest time, independent of the temperature, the clothes put on one over the other are: linen shirt – woolen over dress – leather overcoat. Each one of them has a special meaning as protecting and producing female fertility. Put together they form one complete model expressing the female essence and conceived of as a complete sign for the married woman. In male dresses this right is given to the old man and expresses his first rank position of a complete and sole master of the property, head of family, of the kin and the community.

ABOUT THE LAYERS OF CLOTHING OR THE HORIZONTAL STRUCTURE OF THE TRADITIONAL COSTUME

THE SHIRT – FIRST AMONG DRESSES

Extending beyond the contemporary concept of underwear, the shirt with embroidery (*the embroidered shirt*) is the object of numerous studies related to Southeastern Europe, which discloses its major importance among the elements of clothing having supernatural power. The explanation lies in the fact



that it is in direct contact with the skin and part of it is visible while the other part remains hidden. The shirt is also interpreted as the most common Bulgarian folk concept of a dress in general, equated with the human body as such or the human skin. Created to cover the completely impermissible natural nakedness, which horrifies the traditional man, it becomes an inseparable part of him. In a society with con-



sciousness for the Christian original sin – “*Without a shirt you cannot appear even before God*”, the dress is treated as a family relic, which carries, keeps and transmits the virtues of the members of kin. It is present in everyday life, in holidays, in rituals and is used as a clear sign with multiple functions – from christenings, through weddings to funerals and in the concepts about “this and the other world”. For women, to its sacredness is added the fact that it is made personally (in the family) and is a wedding gift, a sign of kinship.

Among Bulgarian beliefs that lasted until the

19th c. is that of the sky as a shirt or of the “shirt-sky”. This description can be found in Christmas songs sung for the young girls with wishes for their age when they learn the rules and begin preparing their shirts (most of all their future wedding shirts). The Bulgarian woman expresses in the shirt her idea about the world, about its creation and the world order that follows from that. The rich ornamental embroidery indicates a reproduction of a miniature model of the Cosmos. As symbols, they stand next to the eternal *Arbor mundi* (and the semantically equivalent anthropomorphic figure) and are included in the ideal scheme of the order of the Creation in cosmological myths: chaos – heaven – earth – sun – stars – time – plants – animals – man – home – house appliances. The ideas are implanted also in the colors of the shirt. It contains basically three colors: white – red – black. The white and the red represent generally the male and the female principle, the sky and the earth in a holy union. Their combination (the traditional Bulgarian *martenitza*) symbolizes “the live life”. They form together an opposition to the black color, which represents the destruction of the body and of earth itself, the connection with the chthonic creatures. Based on this, the most general color message in the Bulgarian female costume can be brought down to the white of the male principle (heaven) as opposed to the red and the black of the female principle (earthly or chthonic). A combination expressing the idea of stimulating fertility and its protection.

The fabric of the shirt also contributes to its interpretation as a sacred object. It is made primarily of linen or hemp, materials used for centuries. It is believed that they have protective power, being connected with the sky, with *the upper world*. Their fibers are interpreted as a secure bridge to heaven. The impossibility to count them in the sleeve of the linen shirt is taken as the most solid protection against evil-carrying eyes (*evil eye*).

The general construction of the traditional shirt is simple – it has no horizontally cut parts and practically represents a cross, following the cross-like figure of the human body with wide spread hands. The cross expresses the geometric formula of the basic oppositions of space and time in the mediaeval model of the world. In Bulgarian folk mythology it represents the universe, the home or man himself. It is prominent in the main form of the traditional dress to which it imparts the opposition of upper/lower (sky/hell) or right/left (good/bad side) and the unification of the images of the concepts of the micro- and the macrocosmos. There is no hint of asymmetry, taken as one of the markers of the demonic world. In cutting the

shirt no oval shapes are allowed. All parts of the dress have the forms of a rectangle, trapezium, square (rhomb) or a triangle. In this way all the fabric woven on the loom is used. The basic rectangular form inherited from antiquity is mainly used. It is the same in the two major types of shirts (*tunic-like* and *burchanka*). The final result, the different products are achieved by means of different tucks and shoulder folds, which are inherited from the clothes of antiquity fixed with fibulae.

While the form of the shirt is the same and unites in this way all people living in one settlement, the other important part of it, the embroidered ornaments carries the marks of distinction needed by the community. If we can trust the travelers in Bulgarian lands after the 15th c. and the drawings of female dresses made by them (shirts), we shall discover a distribution of the ornaments very close to that used in the 19th c. In the beginning the attempts to protect the openings from the hostile invisible forces lead to the appearance of protective signs on the dresses situated round the neck, on the sleeves, the lower band of the skirts and along the seams. Gradually to these are added also motifs, which situate the embroidering woman in her group and identify her among the rest in her culture.

The first dress cut and sewn dress – the shirt, the child gets at the ritual of christening. Together with its name the child also receives the ritually basic form of dress, characteristic of the settlement community. After baptism, a new shirt marks every important event in its life – from the first tooth, the first steps, the coming of puberty, to the preparation for marriage and the wedding. In Bulgarian tradition it is very important that the young woman makes the ornaments of her own. In the process of embroidering no deviations are allowed because the shirt is a sign, which expresses the experience and the ancient conceptions of the community. There is a model which is strictly kept and put on a piece of cloth with various embroidered ornaments (*zashiv*). It includes the signs allowed for every group of family status. It is kept by the most knowledgeable woman in the village. Following it, every young woman works skillfully directed by members of the family and the group of the women. There is no competition in making the ornaments, the models and the skills are shared by all girls although on the wedding market the unmarried girls are obviously more competitive with the dresses made by them. What is important is that the competition is proclaimed open with equal conditions and the same model. The technical skill will show the perfection of the girl. On the other hand, this makes the choice of the future daughter-in-law much easier. Major impor-



tance is attributed to her ceremonial dress, which is carefully inspected during her presentations.

Marriage is the sublime moment in the life of the community and its is marked by the shirt made of the best cloth with most luxurious ornaments – the shirt for the wedding. It is the solid signal of the life culmination reached. Its ornamentation includes the full richness of symbols of the local embroidery ornamentation. Great importance is attributed to its preservation until old age, as clothing for heaven. It is generally believed that up there the woman will get together with her husband by means of this shirt and her kith and kin will recognize her. The Bulgarian woman connects her existence with this dress – from preparations for its production to wearing it and signifying by means of it. The shirt is an image of the world, both mythological and social, of which it is also a part. One material expression of the traditional model of behavior.

When a male child is born the parents are congratulated for the new shirt – “Happy new shirt”. The greeting hint at the future acquisitions of the family and the son connected with his marriage, the daughter-in-law and her trousseau, which for the family of the bridegroom is materialized by the shirts brought. The shirt is



among the elements of the traditional male costume that is well preserved. It was made by the woman in the family. In the system of rules established in the community it has its place as a social sign – part of the expression of this system. For the woman it is a model of behavior as a process of making, of wearing and as possession. It forms her identity and her position in the female group of the same status. The shirt is the only personal belonging (in Bulgarian tradition the woman has no right to inheritance), it is part of the trousseau (including all clothes that she will wear in her life) which she brings to the new home and her rights on it are preserved. All other clothes, made before the wedding or after it (practically a considerable production) will become property of the husband and of the members of her future family.

For the man the shirts are a present. They are created by the women who belong or will belong to the man's family – his mother, who brought to his father her trousseau and her skills, his fiancée and wife, the wives of his sons and grandsons. Respectively the shirts in the trousseau of his daughters will leave his house and will be somebody else's property. If we return to the moment of his birth, for the man the shirt is a sign of the reproduction of his family, of the

inherited from his father and grandfather rights and responsibilities to persons who constitute and will constitute this family. This is probably one of the reasons why the shirt is the last part of the male costume that is bought by the local craftsmen as a commodity.

The embroidery on the male shirt serves for distinction of status. It is no coincidence that in the 16th c. its presence on the clothes of the Bulgarians is connected in the popular travel notes of Kuripeshich with "*old great freedoms, riches and all sorts of abundance*". It is preserved until late as the only form of personable appearance. In this sense the opinion that *the richer ones wear embroidered shirts* is not an accidental phrase. The quality of the shirts of the rich men, of the families with prestige, is determined by their better choice, by their marriage to a more skillful and industrious woman. The shirt and the woman who made it were a desired acquisition and suitable possession of the man. Similar to overcoats and shoes, bought and presented to the woman, the shirt, the respective present by the woman, also signifies the man's social status and that of his family.

The ornaments of the embroidery, far more scanty than that on the female shirts, appears on the male shirts to designate sexual maturity and membership in the group of young men ready for marriage. When he is young, the man is allowed rich ornamentation. With old age the general form and fabric of the dress is preserved, but the old man, as well as the old woman are deprived of the red color and the embroidery. Disappears the strongest sign of the reproduction process of the community, which no longer belongs to them. During their life the man and the woman wear their shirts as a sign of belonging to the community organism, to the social environment in which they live. They follow then in their conceptions about the other world and even represent them in heaven. In some regions it is believed that these are the clothes from christening, in others they are treated as the wedding shirt itself. These are all clear signs whose communicative importance is transmitted to life after death by the traditional man.

SECOND LAYER – SEXUALLY DISTINCT CLOTHES

Female upper clothes. The traditional upper clothes of Bulgarian women are divided into four basic types. Very popular is the tunic-like *sukman* – with or without sleeves and the *saya* – the dress open on the front, with short or long sleeves. There are a number of theories about their origin and the influence of several types of dress worn during the Middle ages

and similar to the Boyar tunic. There is also in Bulgarian scientific literature a theory, which attributes to the ancient Thracians the form of the sukman with gathers and the tucking of the woolen clothes over the ancient hython as an expression of prestige and well-being. The *saya*, as a more progressive form of clothing, which contains the local peculiarities, is preserved to a very late period – the middle of the 20th c. This is partly due to it being classified as a major piece of upper clothing instead of a supplementary seasonal piece. It is characteristic of the upper layer in Bulgarian female dresses that it includes also clothes described as *neither cut, nor sewn*. Some of them are produced by gathers, others are wrapped round the body or just put on, a combination of an apron in front and an apron in the function of a back skirt. They are interpreted as a variant of the oldest wedding dress, a symbol of fertility. This idea is supported by numerous examples from Balkan traditional costumes. The last type includes a basic dress in the form of a shirt and a lower part wrapped round the body in the form of an apron. The combination is very ancient.

Most of the upper female clothes contrast with their colorfulness with the white color of the shirt. The black or dark blue color is remarkable for the sukman. With the costumes consisting of two aprons the darkening of color spreads from west to east – from the red color through combinations with dark blue to pure dark blue. With the *saya*, keeping the same direction, we have a change in the color combination based on the red. With the use of the new fabric, the striped *aladza*, there appear combinations of dark blue, red, and white, and later green. It is not without importance that the impressive general brightness of color is achieved with few colors only, which can be grouped round the triad already mentioned (characteristic of the shirt and its ornamentation): white – red – black, but this time with the priority of the dark colors: black (dark blue) – red – white.

Very often the upper female clothes bring together the brightest decoration. This is achieved with the fabric ornamentation; the choice of applications; with specific elements of embroidery, made of red, yellow, green, and white threads; with the silvery thread (*tin-sel*) or with a black or multicolored woolen braid (*gaitan*), sewn in rows or interlacing; with the contrast of the white stitches; with hemstitch lace; addition of sequins, beads, woolen pompons, etc. The result of their application is the innumerable combinations and each one of them becomes a characteristic of the settlement.

In making the folk costumes (most of the ways are



common for the separate regions) the purpose of the fabrics is strictly determined and no mixing of the materials is allowed. Almost all upper clothes and overcoats are made of wool. They are used to mark the division internal/external. With its qualities, the “more natural” woolen fabric is directed towards the external world, it belongs to it and builds up specific positions in it. It is ritually opposed to linen and hemp, akin to the sky and the sun, and they are used in making the internal layer. In Bulgarian folk tradition wool belongs to earth, it is to a certain extent connected with evil power and in dreams it is interpreted as *the soul of a dead person*. It has the function of a guarding border between the worlds, which separates and connects them. The woolen thread is used in rituals when one needs help from the other world since it is believed that one can look for prosperity and wealth there. The semantic functions of wool is particularly important in wedding rituals. It is believed that everything positive brought by wool is transmitted to the clothes made of it. It is common practice to wrap the dough or the yeast for the bread so that it rises well. This is common practice in preparing the ritual bread on St. George’s day to secure during the next year the birth of female lambs, which is explained with the fertility-giving power of woolen female clothes.

No matter what kind of folk costume characterizes the region (*with two aprons, sukman, saya*), the children, irrespective of their sex, are wrapped after their first steps in a rectangular piece of woolen cloth, resembling an apron – *futa*. The ancient origin of the dress is indisputable. It belongs to the so-called fabric put directly on the body, which covers it between waist and the ankles. In general the dresses for children include much more ancient elements than those for adults but in the same time the child is the first to receive the influence of the town in the changes of fashion that follow. While the shirt, as a sign of belonging to the community, is received immediately after birth together with baptizing, the upper dress, determining the village community, is worn only after entering fertile age. The holiday called Lazarov day is the time when the right to a “female” dress is received. But there are strict stages between the dress of the young girl just entering puberty and that of the young woman ready for marriage.

Readiness for marriage is also judged by the skill to make your own dress. Models are borrowed from other girls but are strictly fixed for a given village. As a matter of fact the woman prepares the basic part of the clothes that she will wear in her life when she is

still unmarried. According to a local interpretation, the challenge of attracting the eyes of men cannot be demonstrated openly by a married woman. For that reason the making of the clothes is given to the innocent thoughts of the young girls. They give themselves entirely to this occupation. Expenses for the self-made fabric for the dresses began to express the well-being of the girl and her family. This leads to the 14-meter long *bruchnik*, which makes women wearing it to faint.

The type of upper dress, expressing the culmination of life, can also inform for the status of the woman – just married (*young bride*) or a mother of two or three children (*nevesta*). By the way the skirts of the dress are folded they can indicate even the number of grown up married sons and daughters-in-law. Tucking the ends of the skirt (called *wings*) backwards into the belt marks the most active female period. This mark is used with dresses with two aprons, with the *sukman* and the *sya*. For that purpose the skirts are decorated also in the lower part. This is practice together with wearing several upper dresses one over the other, having the same cut and the same ornaments. This results in a complex decoration of the costume composition, which is exceptional.



Layering, the construction of combining various layers leads us to the ancient Balkan heritage of expressing a higher status.

Very often women add detachable decorative strips at the back called *tails*. They are described in research papers as a remnant of a decorative super-long sleeve of an older mediaeval dress, which gave the sleeveless *sukman*. The local explanation for their use is that the women wearing them *were with wings*. The bird and its feathers is a very common decorative element in the female costume. They can be seen in the ornaments of the embroidery and the fabric, in the form of the specific female comb-like hat and are an inseparable part of the jewelry and hair decorations. The meaning attributed to them in the traditional world of the Bulgarian is protection from evil powers and belonging to the family of the husband and the male line of inheritance.

In the Great wheel of life, a popular theme in the art of the Revival, old age is represented as equal to winter, and the old man is depicted as falling headlong to his or her earthly paradise. Probably such an equation of symbolism finds expression also in the choice of "seasonal" dress by young and old women. The winter clothing of the young married women remains for the summer as the only dress for old women. It is interesting that the clothes marking the old woman, are worn in the village by women of all ages as a dress of morning. This can be explained most often with the introduction of morning in black. But there is also coincidence in the old type of morning. In most of the regions this is clothes turned inside out and/or clothes torn into pieces. The interpretation of turning the dress of the widow inside out is that it covers her uncontrollable sexuality. The act of distorting the costume during morning is connected also with the danger of magic forces. This can explain equation with the old woman and her specific position interpreted as being close to that same border. On the other hand, in both cases (forceful or not) sexuality is deleted which is demonstrated by complete coverage.

Wearing the upper dress specific for every age



preserves the strict rules and the rights of women that women follow from childhood to old age. The second layer in the construction of the female costume and the qualities of its basic fabric – wool, with its specific ornamentation and manner of wearing, is one of the most precise signs of female reproductive abilities and expresses the most important evaluation in the traditional community.

The female apron – a dress for transition. The aprons are among the most often discussed elements of the costumes of Bulgarian women, a deciphered symbol in rituals and recognized social indicator. They are always present at the day of the young women ready for marriage – Lazarov day. They are also part of the wedding dress. Their role in the traditional dress is more than a decoration – much more symbolic than relating it to a type of activity connected with women. Elementary in construction, they are formed as dresses, framed by a rim, often by a connecting stitch and strings attached. The diversity of Bulgarian aprons is due to the fact that they are



among the most expressive signs of origin. They have their specific decoration, ornaments or coins attached to them, tassels, pompons, pendants, beads, sequins, braids, velvet, lace, etc. There are many names deriving from the characteristic decorations, strictly followed in each village. When the local population speaks of identification by means of the dress they have in mind the aprons in the first place. Their signs may be used to delineate the map of the villages in Bulgaria and the connections between them.

As one of the major decorative centers of the costume, the apron is equal in importance with the shirt. It is no coincidence that all symbols in the elements of embroidery of the shirt, are even more expressive in the fabric of the apron. Prominent is the presence of the rhomb, a figure discovered in the most ancient document depicting the *Arbor mundi* – a stylized tree, surrounded by rhombs. This is a motif very common for the apron in Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, Moldova and the Ukraine. Researchers deciphered it as an element provoking sexuality and fertility. It is found as early as the Neolithic period in female fig-

ures of clay (covering the hind parts) – a variant of the first wedding dress.

The interpretation of the apron as “an object like a womb” determines ritual acts connected with it. Probably the volume of the front of the dressed formed by means of it makes it equal to the female part which it covers. The pregnancy of the woman definitely has its influence. That is why it is included as an attribute of the wedding. It is believed that in extreme, critical situations in life this dress protects and helps the transition. Especially during birth. Very popular are the practices of relieving and stimulating the birth process, of driving away the evil forces and attributing additional female strength by touching, striking, hitting at the waist or making the sign of the cross with an apron (that of the midwife or the mother-in-law). Or the obligatory ritual to unfasten and take off the apron by the woman in birth and even all women present and those who learned about the beginning of the birth process by chance and are not in direct contact. The newly born child who is believed to come from a different world – the world of the grandfathers, is always taken in a woman’s apron which means its gradual introduction as a new member of the community. The dress has its importance in burial rituals as well. In an order opposite to that for births, it prepares *the exit from this world to the other*. The last sweeping of the grave is done with the apron of the women closely related to the diseased (mother, wife). And again the aprons of the women present are taken off.

The connection of this element of the dress with participation of young girls in the ritual of Laxarov day is very close. In regions where it is not part of the folk costume, the apron is necessarily included in the ritual dress. By putting it on and the right to wear it an announcement is made that girls have reached sexual maturity and are ready to receive the necessary proposals. That is why the aprons of the young girls are bright and covered with numerous tinkling coins (*old coins*), even with small bells. As a detachable element the symbolic apron often takes part in the silent exchange of acts of attracting attention, of establishing communication, of keeping up or cutting off communication, even of declarations of love. This is signaled by the manner in which the man in love touches the rim of the apron.

The costume of the young married woman necessarily includes layering, putting several dresses of different ornamentation one over the other. The distinction between married and unmarried women is also achieved by means of the color of the tying strings round the waist. They are of many colors, many tas-



sels and are tied in a special way, called *like a key* – to the left by unmarried girls and to the right by married women. The dress of the old women includes broader aprons made of two fabrics, usually used by pregnant women. The coincidence is not accidental and is connected with the conception of the pregnant woman as standing on the border between the worlds. The old women are trying to express the same with their costume. The apron is interpreted as designating the capability of the woman to give birth to children. In the horizontal level of the traditional female costume the apron closes the second protective circle that guarantees a better realization in the world around us and indicates exact position in the female status groups.

Male costumes – between white and black. The black male folk costumes became popular in the middle of the 18th c. and displaced the white ones until the middle of the 19th c. This is a major claim in Bulgarian ethnographic territory. Exceptions are the western and north-western regions. The costumes differ not only in color but also in the quantity of the fabric used, the simplicity of the cut, the specialized decoration and the general silhouette. The transition goes on in the end of the 19th c. and the beginning of the 20th c., until the complete establishment of the black color in the male costume. This is a process concerning mostly the regions with well developed and flourishing crafts. The mass production of tailor made clothes of black and light-brown *aba* brings unification to male costumes. This leads to a situation when

it is difficult to tell where is the end of the traditional and where begins the new culture of the National Revival. Signs appear, which indicate primarily material well-being. Until the 18th c. they were strictly forbidden for the Christian Bulgarians and their use was strictly watched and punished by state institutions.

Signs of prestige, like the loose upper clothing made of expensive materials; expensive overcoats with fur or fur hats; the use of silk, of silk girdles and shawls; even the use of socks were considered unthinkable for Bulgarians. Most of the new elements introduced in the middle of the 18th c. and the new signs are a reaction against the long suppressed opportunity for expression by means of clothes. The loose richly decorated with braids clothes, characteristic of the black color costumes can be also interpreted as a demonstration of the growing self-confidence since wearing them annihilates age-old prohibitions and opens opportunities for an equal expression, not dim-



ply a blind imitation. They are characteristic of the Ottoman Empire but are produced by the Bulgarians – starting with the wool, the make of the materials, the tailoring and trading.

In the second half of the 19th c. we can discover in the dresses of the Bulgarians most of the variants of the male dresses with wide trouser legs – from the most archaic pieces of leather tied round the legs and the waist to the trousers fashionable for that period. Among the traditional folk costumes priority is given



to the loose black colored pants, *poturi*, which replaced, after many centuries, the tight white pants, *benevrek*. We know of drawings of travelers in the Ottoman Empire from the middle of the 16th c., beginning of the 17th c. and beginning of the 18th c. in which Bulgarians are represented in such a tight light colored dress in the lower part of the body. Presumably it is the result of wearing two separate legs of the trousers for protecting the body – in movement, in work in the field, in horse riding, even as an armor in military action. It is a continuation of the widely spread tight Balkan *benevretzi*, the mediaeval Bulgarian *nogavitzi*, as well as the West European male clothes, tight in the legs, with or without a soul piece, so characteristic in Western Europe until the 12th–13th c. In Bulgarian traditional costumes the separate trouser legs – *nogavitzi* are preserved until the beginning of the 20th c. in their original form. They are produced from unprocessed goat

(sheep) skin and are connected primarily with the activities of the shepherd. The dress protects against cold, moisture and especially rain, when it is put on with the fur outwards. The extreme looseness of the new type of dress and the low bottom, reaching sometimes to the ankles, become the priority of the rich man unoccupied in heavy physical labor. This creates some kind of measure of financial status. There are no more general markers relating to the professional success or success in life than this type of traditional male dress.

The right to put on trousers (*gashti*), this typically male dress, is given with reaching a particular age – seven, eight years and in some regions it is accompanied by special rituals. Until this moment the small boy does not differ in clothing from the small girl. It wears above the shirt the same dress of the apron type that covers the lower part of the body or a dress similar to the woman's (*sukman*). The age indicated is important in the life of boys for it marks their inclusion in the work of the family, which is clearly divided into male and female. It marks the beginning of acquiring the basic traditional occupation. In the process of labor the concepts of agriculture begin to appear. In the same way skills are created in animal breeding. About seven or eight children are oriented professionally to learning the traditional Bulgarian crafts. The new beginning, leaving the world of the mother and the grandmother, the family or even the village is demarcated with the first male dress. It differs considerably from that worn by the man, the full-fledged member of the community. Until he learns all crafts and skills, connected with the way in which he will earn his leaving and that of his future family, no one is ready for marriage and has no right to use the signs and the dress of the adults.

The costume of the grown-up youngster speaks of new rights and obligations, the first one being to get married – *to make a home*. His trousers (*gashti*) are remarkable for the decorations of black *gaitan* (woolen braids) or special embroidery. In the area of the knees there are special richly ornamented thickenings. There are also extensions in the end of the leg (*pachi*) which cover part of the foot. They are very often described as *rooster's parts*. The comparison with the rooster is not accidental. In the rituals of the life cycle of the Bulgarian it is a symbol of male potency and an emblem of the male status. In patriarchal society the rooster symbolizes the sexually mature man.

The upper part of the traditional male dress usually includes the simultaneous use of two or three white dresses, open in the front and reaching the

waist or knee-long white dresses. Their combination, putting them one over the other – from a dress with short sleeves to dress with long sleeves (or reaching the elbow), wearing them separately or in reverse order, guarantees minimal practical comfort for every season or occasion. By the manner of ordering, the choice of separate elements or the whole set signs are created that speak about the age and the status of the person wearing them in the village community. Some ranking starting from the person clad only in the sleeveless dress (*elek*) to the one dressed up in the complete set at hot holidays and even on work days, i.e. all clothes *which a well-off good man had to possess*.

The rule that the dress of the child should differ from that of the adult is preserved even with changes in the upper male clothing. It is made only from old, already used woolen fabrics. With the first new and richly decorated clothes of the grown-up young man, there is an important requirement that he leaves the greater part of the shirt open, to represent some nakedness. Thus they are often without sleeves, open at the front and have a deep well-decorated front cut. It is quite the opposite with the old man who regular-



ly (meaning by obligation) wears the full set of local upper clothes which are buttoned and cut round the neck. Irrespective of the season, in being overdressed he can compare only to the young married woman. Probably with him too overdressing is an expression not of some sensitivity to cold due to old age but a sign often used in antiquity to indicate the top of the life hierarchy. We can discover this sign in traditional way of dressing which marks the first order position among men of the oldest man and the father of the family.

Common for the regions is the competition in ornamentation but it is used only within and according to the rules of age demarcation. Competition with lots of specific braids (*gaitan*) is allowed only for the young men. An important indication of wealth and prestige is also the color of the fabrics. The black (dark blue) color, primarily worn by Bulgarian craftsmen and tradesmen, comes to mark a new status and new feel of self-confidence, an attempt for new symbolization and a new aesthetics. We can interpret in this sense the introduction of the "city black" in



male costumes which lasted in more backwards regions even after the Liberation again under the influence of the town.

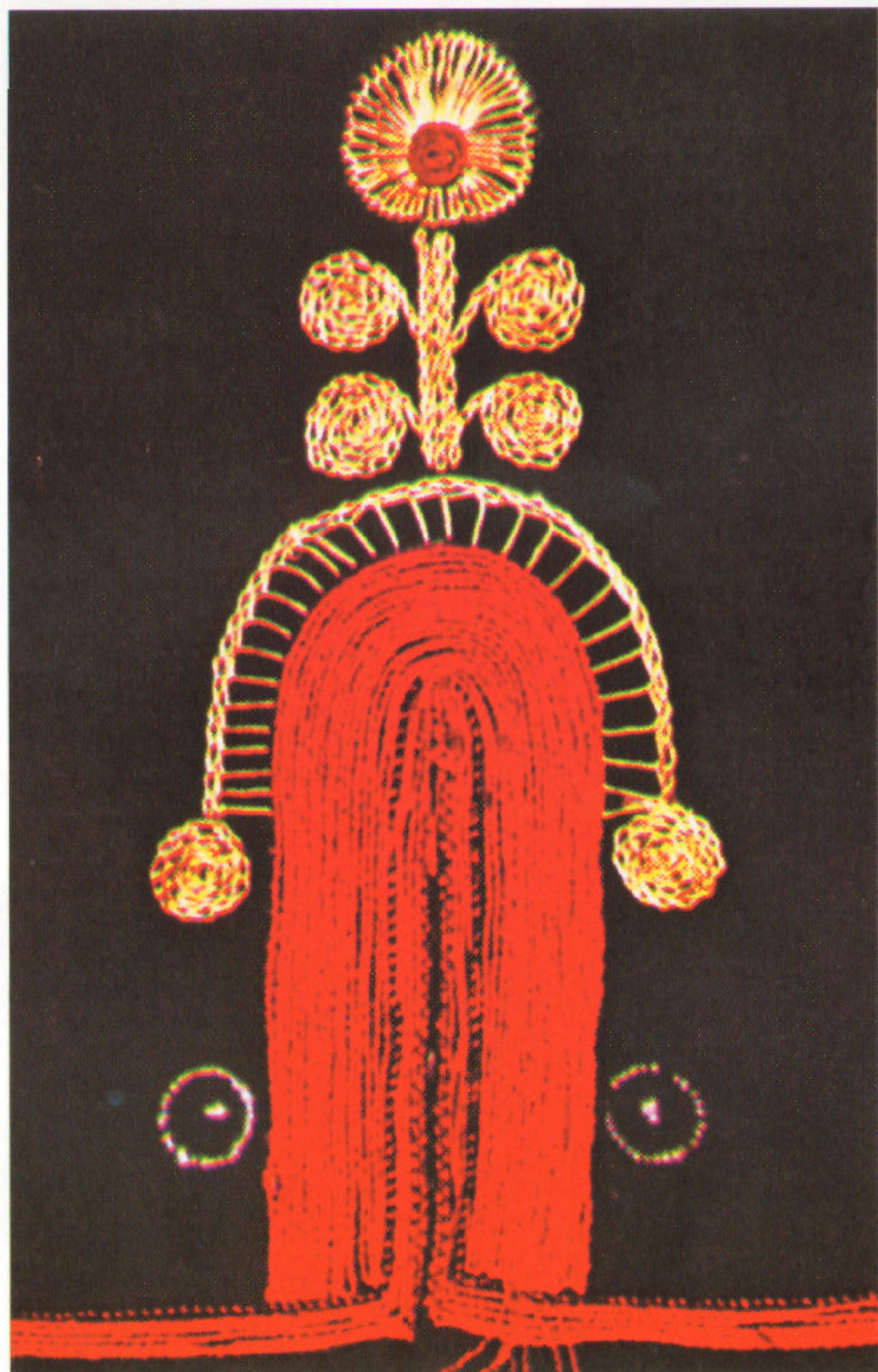
ABOUT UPPER CLOTHING AND FURS

In the 19th c. the upper female clothing covers a wide range – from the archaic samples to the first fashionable ones. The brightest decoration covers the old sleeveless dresses reaching the knees. The decoration is rich and contrasting also in the group of the colorful upper clothes with sleeves reaching the elbows. A product of craftsmen, changing their form, are long dresses with long sleeves, expensive and richly decorated. They are made of fine materials (or leather) with lining of sheep skin and decorations of game skin. There is in addition black or red *gaitan*, silver fibers and multicolored silk embroidery, tassels and gallons. With time this part begins to differ from the other parts of the costume with its complicated cut, inserted side pieces and well-expresses curve of



the sleeve.

Quick changes in the upper dress are not accidental. They are the result of its role of signifier. As a obligatory wedding present, it is not made by the woman herself but bought on the male side, by the father-in-law and the mother-in-law. In Bulgarian traditional society the upper dress is interpreted as a symbol of abundance, wealth, happiness and family status. It marks the conclusion of the marriage negotiations. In most of the cases it is worn for the first time at the wedding, put on inside out, with the fur on the outside or the front pieces attached to the



back and allowing the fur to be seen. It is worn permanently in a definite period of time by the bride, irrespective of atmospheric conditions. Weather is connected with the specific taboos to which the young woman is subjected in her new home. The dress is put on special days chosen for that and then is hung or thrown on a tree. From that moment on it becomes a dress for holidays and is again worn until the birth of one or two children.

Very specific for this element of the female costume is the animal skin, as basic material, lining or



decoration, determined by the symbolic (ritual and social) role that it performs. The semantics of the sheep skin is transparent for the strongly desired prosperity, abundance and wealth. At some specific moments it changes considerably towards the feature "alien", "animal" (non-human), "natural" which very precisely expresses the transitional status of the bride in her new community. The inclusion of animal skins in the space of female wedding dresses secures and guarantees protection of the woman from the mysterious world with which she is connected. It is also considered that it is from this world that she draws power. For that purpose in the wedding ritual she looks for the exit – a means of communication with the "other world" and it is achieved through turning the upper dress with the skin outwards. The practice of turning the dresses inside out is present at all possible moments and transitional states – it is obligatory for the young mother and at burial ceremonies. For the bride it is a risky period, connected with her first pregnancy. The whole community looks at her as a bearer of her own and of universal fertility. For that purpose until St. George day (May 6), until the day of the "golden rain of St. George", the bride necessarily wears her upper dress. Not wearing it is impossible

and might have heavy results for the whole village community, although we know of serious health damages of young women working in the field in very high temperatures. The exceptional fertile energy of the young woman, destined to create for the first time a new life, is carefully covered with the dress. It protects and helps not only her but other members of the community. It is at the same time believed that this stimulates the forces of growth and the required results are achieved – successful creation, carrying and birth of a child; fertile rain and rich harvest. The practice of hanging the upper dress of the bride on a tree, after her first ritual undressing, is among the most archaic, popular enough as the semantics of the gold

fleece. It discloses the idea of the hidden and growing well-being whose final aim is longevity and many children.

The lack of an upper dress in the costume is also a clear sign, but this time of an unmarried woman. One of the basic complexes in Bulgarian folk songs includes motifs which unite the young girl, the sun and the seasons. They are sang mainly at wedding rituals or at Christmas holidays. In traditional myths the opposition of winter colds (the freezing of nature) and summer heat (growth and harvest) is connected with the sun, interpreted as an anthropomorphic god. In winter it is weak and defeated by the beauty of the girl on earth, who *shines brighter* than him. In summer, when the sun is strong, its marriage begins. It steals the girl from her family and she becomes its wife. This gives the concept of summer as a symbolic wedding. The already mentioned lack of practiciness or the lack of upper dress of the unmarried girl can find explanation in the representation of the girl's strength which outshines the sun. Or it can be deciphered as motivated by the desire to show preservation in the home, to demonstrate the "loneliness of the unmarried girl", to stress on occupation with



house work related to the trousseau, activity particularly intense in winter. This also contributes to the complete image of the modest and diligent young woman waiting for her wedding.

Conceiving a child to which the upper dress is related can be interpreted in no other way than as a right and possession of the man's family. That is why this dress is presented by him and after the wedding the woman must wear it as a sign of belonging to his family. Putting the dress on is equivalent to marriage. Sometimes by forcing the girl to put on the dress she is forced to accept an unwanted bridegroom. With her marriage the woman passes entirely "under the sign" of her husband and his family and with the upper layer in her costume she expresses her pride in this belonging. In this sense the last dress in her costume can be defined as a "male dress". It is such as an acquisition and as a fundamental image in the general composition. This partly explains the similarity of upper male and female clothes and the material expressiveness achieved through them.

The ceremonial and ritual use of the upper

female dress also discloses the idea of the social status. It belonged for the first time to the young married woman, standing on the highest level in female hierarchy. By means of her *kozuh*, *kyurk*, worn permanently in ceremonial costumes, she demonstrates that she has been estimated according to her merits with a present for the wedding. The value of the dress, the most expensive, and the fact that it was bought turn her into a sign of well-being, prosperity and success of her family.

The 1930s–1940s still preserve almost unchanged the traditional male upper clothes. Widely spread is the use of the so-called *yamurluk* with its two main variants, of the characteristic cape or the dress with long sleeves. It is made of special material whose qualities are known from antiquity – wool with goat fleece or pure wool, thick specially processed fabric which is bucléd at places (with the buclé inwards) for additional thermal protection.

The right to use the upper dress (or not), to possess it (or not) distinguishes married from unmarried men in the village community. It is interpreted as a ritual dress, kept as the most precious object and used in very special occasions. Both with the bride and the bridegroom wearing the dress gives a sign of belonging to the family. We must have in mind that in a traditional house the large leather male dress and the *yamurluk* are possessions of the father of the family, of the head of the family. They are sewn and ordered



only for him but used by other members of the family on special occasions – at work or while traveling. Each house has at least one such “family dress”. In this sense borrowing or lending it for the wedding ritual can be taken as belonging to the family and as a wish for wealth, abundance, for similar future rights.

The long fur coats and the dresses lined with fur in general are not worn by unmarried men. Only when they are performing Christmas rituals they borrow them but even then they don't put them on and only throw them on their shoulders. These strict rules are strictly kept in the traditional community and are among the few preserved rules until late in male clothing. They are depicted in the portraits of donor families in churches and monasteries from the 15th until the 18th c. The young church donors are represented with their upper dresses on their shoulders (rarely they have short sleeves and are shorter) and in all cases they differ in their form and manner of wearing from the fathers or the elder brothers.

The right to possess an upper dress and its use as a most visible and last layer of the traditional costume is connected with the greatest achievements of the man, with reaching the highest position in the hierarchy of traditional values. It distinguishes the married man, the elderly man or the very wealthy man. By that principle the set used by the old man (and the richer one) is always complete. Every day, irrespective of the season, he can wear all male clothes characteristic of the village, the most valuable one included. It is among the signs of the father of the family, the head of the house, the only owner of the property, of the all-empowered master of the family. It marks the old man who represents the family in the community and very often the community itself before the world, in the capacity of an alderman.

Preserved and used till late, the upper clothes keep longer their symbolic importance as parts of the costume. This is probably due to the fact that they present the man out of the house, at time of traveling, of work, in the open, i.e. in the basic male territory of activity. Among the upper clothes we have also the one which is most expressive as a professional marker – the shepherd's *yamurluk*. In addition to professional differences, the upper dress informs of differences in living standard and indicates the position of the man in the social hierarchy. The high social status is expressed through the type of the material (expensive fabric, not home made), its coloring (black, dark blue), its length and the presence of the fur. No matter that it is bought, the use of the dress is not subject to fashionable tendencies and remains traditional, the only one in the life of its owner and the whole family.



For its preservation in a relatively unchanged form contributes the fact that it is very practical, it has ritual representative functions, a family sign or rather the marker of the head of the family.

SIGNS IN THE VERTICAL STRUCTURE OF THE TRADITIONAL COSTUME

In Bulgarian mythological concepts the world is made up of the universal three levels, which vary from the earthly of the present to the *other world*, which is divided for precision into upper and lower, good and bad, paradise and hell. In the vertical structure of the traditional costume, the environment, the world of the living person is exemplified by the girdle. It is natural then that in one of the most popular Bulgarian ver-

sions of the Creation the human race comes on earth last, after failures with giants and dwarves. Of middle height and most adapted to the middle (earthly) world, human beings are obliged to bear the sign of that – a girdle round the middle of their body. Similar is the story of the *three girdles* which tells that the upper floor is occupied by people who wear a band (*girdle themselves*) round their necks (head), in the middle world the people wear it round their waist, and in the lower world, underground, they wear it round their knees. We have thus delineated three zones with clear characteristics in the tripartite structure of the Universe. In the “Dumezil” scheme they are comparable with the social functions of Indo-European societies and their designation (one of the most ancient in cultural practice) by means of elements or accessories to the costumes is indisputable.

The Bulgarian epics about heroes reproduce the struggle for superiority of the “girl-hero” with her marriage candidates and the triple slaying of her body through the knees, the waist and the neck interpreted as a ritual death. The “triple slaying”, one of the key concepts in the archaic interpretation of the world, is also reproduced in the wedding costume and from there in the traditional female costume in general. This is achieved through putting the accent on separate zones, by special covering of the woman’s body – the head, the belt (the hands and the neck) and the legs, marked also in epic texts. The marking of these zones in the vertical structure of the general composition of the female traditional costume is completed with the presents of the fiancée which include the metal belt, strings of coins, bracelets, head decorations, called *woman’s weapon*, and the leather shoes, the clearest signs of the family status in the traditional community. On the

same levels are also put their textile analogues – girdle and belt, *breast piece* – from the neck to the waist, covered with old coins; *arm pieces* – bracelets made of cloth from the wrists to the elbows; a hat and a head cover; *kaltzi* – separate legs of trousers made of cloth or knitted that cover the leg between the ankle and the knee. They have to cover the most vulnerable parts of the woman’s body, to protect her and help in her realization as a mother. Their originals can be found in parts of the clothing universally protecting man since antiquity, objects with indisputable ritual value – soldier’s breast piece, belt, knee piece and a helmet. The connection with the male military attributes just mentioned is not without reason if we come to

the ritual slaying of the girl-hero, to the central role of this personage in the Bulgarian wedding,

to



the performed death of the social body and the passing into a new status – from a virgin into a woman. Most probably this idea was preserved, asserted and told also through the traditional clothing.

THE MIDDLE – BELT AND GIRDLE

The contemporary idea of the belt as an accessory underestimates its initial function to secure freedom of movements and to fix the piece of cloth to the body. In the visual division into the human upper part and lower parts by means of clothes, there is one part that is mostly strongly symbolically loaded. In research papers the girdle (belt) is called *the key to the basic composition*, a definition that can be accepted in view of its practical role and the imparted meanings in the space of the traditional costume.

In the mediaeval world of the Christian Bulgarian the girdle *as a metaphor for life in chastity* is obligatory and must never be taken off. The rules survive implanted into the female girdle (belt), which is taken by the traditional community to be the major sign of moral purity. Its outside appearance is also preserved. Continuity guaranteed also by the fact that the horizontal cut characteristic of Western Europe after the

the back or hang on the sides. Specialized research describes their appearance in pre-historic times as a means of attracting sexual attention. Their use, popular everywhere in the traditional costumes in the Near East and Europe, is defined as sexually provocative. They are described as the most ancient female marking of the “readiness to have children”. We can find confirmation of this also in the abundant presence of such decorations in Bulgarian practice, especially in the clothes of the woman ready to be married.

An inseparable part of the traditional costume, the belt (the girdle) is loaded with many functions – utilitarian, decorative, symbolic, which complement each other. Prominent is its basic function to protect man from against all visible and invisible evils of the world around. Some else, it embodies the human strength and life itself. By the manner of wearing it it can express the present, the past or the future. An important moment in its making is marking the beginning and the end. Most often this is done by putting many

tassels and pendants at the end of the strips (called *the letter*) and by the mysterious presence in the beginning of the binding material of figures of human beings or of stars, which after that are hidden next to the body. The belt (girdle) is interpreted as some kind of line of life, which is probably the result of the fact

16th c. is not introduced in Bulgarian folk costumes.

The female girdles and belts are the result of many centuries of use and include the oldest processes of producing materials. The set of techniques that exists offers an opportunity to demonstrate the transition from the most primitive braids to the creation of the classical weaving. There are narrow and long belts, wide and multicolored girdles, short belts widely known for their metal part (*pafti*) – special and extremely beautiful products of craftsmanship. Their textile strips prepared by the woman herself, are exceptional in their coloring, brightness of embroidery and are therefore called rainbows (*zunka, zunitza*). The similarity is best preserved in their textile and embroidery ornamentation. Even the rainbow itself is called girdle.

All types of female girdles have as parts of narrow or wide belts (girdles) additional tassels and numerous colored woolen pendants and pompons. While dressing they fall loose at

that, at putting it on, it has a beginning, a middle and an end and forms a spiral round the body, taken to



be equal to development. The end of one's life time (death) is marked with the expression *this is the end of his girdle*. This is the origin of the belief that the longer the girdle the longer a person will live. By means of it the woman can protect herself and to retell her life story. Marking the most important stages in it are expressed in the value of this part of the dress to attract, stimulate, protect, and guarantee the ability to have children. This can be achieved only in

marriage which automatically turns the belt into a metaphor or more precisely a description of the concrete plight of a woman.

The girdling suitable for conceiving, keeping and giving birth to the child is among the most stable traditional practices based on the belief in

the positive result of the contact of the material with the woman's body. Many variants are used starting with the special thread up to the wide girdle with icons painted on it. One specifically protective means is the so-called *grass-snake belt* – snake skin wrapped in cloth. The pregnant woman keeps it till birth and keeps it for next pregnancies. The position of the snake on the woman's waist, equal to the belt, must have been inherited from old beliefs. The snake is conceived of as a creature with cosmic functions, which *holds the earth*, a universal classifier that connects the three elements of "death, birth, life".

Most widely accepted is the opinion that successful pregnancy can be secured by the everyday use of the metal belt, the wedding present of the bridegroom and his parents. As material and form the *pafti* have rich semantic load. They remind of two eyes and base their influence on their connection with the human

face as an apotropy. In this kind of belt the strength of the woolen material and the leather is completed by that of the metal. There are also many examples of adding strength by additional small metal axes, knives, padlocks, keys, crosses and old coins. Data from the 11th c. contain the old belief that demons are afraid of sharp metal and so from it are made amulets of different form – axes, spears, and swords.

Attachment to metal objects can be explained with their ability to "reflect" and thus repulse evil. In the same time the chain worn on the waist with rings and keys is one of the common and ancient symbols of sex and fertility.

The memory of the use of the traditional female belt as a sign is preserved clearly today. Narrow and long, with tassels and pendants, it is put on to mark the young woman and is worn to seduce, to attract



attention, to express readiness for marriage. With a new specific form (wide *girdle*, the belt with *pafti*) it becomes a sign of the married woman and secures her successful pregnancy. It not only protects but also covers/hides the woman's figure and visually repre-

sents her acquisition by the man. The active participation of the father-in-law and the mother-in-law in giving it as a present and the obligation of the bride to wear it during a given period (most often connected with conception and birth) gives ground to believe that the girdle expresses the protection and the acquisition of the rights on the woman and her children. In a changed form the belt protects the old woman against death.

From the parts of the traditional male costume it is only the girdle that can be compared, in its semantic load, with the female clothing. It is interpreted as producing, protecting, healing magic sign. Circling in a spiral-like way the human navel, it is related to the idea of the creation. In Bulgarian traditional conceptions about the creation and tripartite structure of the world, the girdle designates the present and alife on earth, by being worn round the middle of the body. Belief in the protective power of this part of the costume has something to do also with the cirdle that it makes round the waist, "the center of human life". By means of it we can easily achieve a magical, organized, closed, and protected circular space. This explains its presence in many ritual situations in which it is designed to protect the man, the family, even the community from evil forces. Its strong effect turns it into one of the clear male symbols with its central position at the wedding. Protection also means (and is performed with the aim) to achieve closeness, brotherhood; sometimes adoption or the family union during funerals, the loss of some member, when those alive girdle themselves together. Connecting the ideas of a girdle and a family it preserves the symbolism of internalization into the family and the male line of inheritance. For the relatives they say – *they are on the same girdle*. And the opposite act – of rupture, of cutting, of stepping over the girdle as a symbol of ritual alienation or disruption of the family relation, of breaking the marriage of the brothership.

"A man without a girdle is not a man". Putting on the girdle means readiness for marriage, sexual maturity and is usually related to the first participation in the rituals on Christmas (*koleduvane*). Red, in all its nuances, is the preferred color by young unmarried men. There are, like in the female dresses, lots of tassels hanging on the sides, on the left and on the right, depending on the family status. The girdles of young men are completed with characteristic signs of sexual might and seduction – motley belts with many woolen pendants. In the process of amorous communication they realize still another function of the dress. Young girls prepare them especially for the



beloved ones or give as presents similar strings from their aprons. The young men take them (sometimes steal them) and tie them round their waists as a sign to the community that he has chosen a girl. Highly prized is the additional metal decoration, worn as an amulet during the Middle ages. Hammered into or hanging from the leather belts are metal studs, soldiers' buttons, yellow pins, metal pieces in the form of a small dagger, knives, rifles, coins or metal chains, hanging down to the thighs.

Both with women and with men the signs characterizing the sexually active period, participation in the reproduction of the community, are carefully deleted with the coming of old age. The girdle becomes dark red, brownish or darker, there are no tassels and the metal accessories. The change "No more" is demonstrated particularly categorically by one of the most male symbols in the traditional costume. Irrespective of the innovations, an expression of the changed status or self-confidence, the generally accepted type of the woolen, domestically woven red male girdle remains unchanged and stands till late, till the final disintegration of traditional costumes. Within the vil-



large community its material, coloring, manner of wearing are not expressions of difference in the living standard. The girdle is one of the male symbols in clothing and attention is directed primarily to its sexual and age symbolism.

SHOES AND SYMBOLIZATION OF THE POSITION "DOWN"

The feet, as a mark of the chthonic, a body sign of the female sex, of sexuality, and fixing the most dangerous position in the human body – the position "down", are most extremely carefully marked, covered, and protected. In the Bulgarian wedding ceremonies the incorporation of the woman into the house of the husband, her transition to a new life position is marked by the shoe. Putting on shoes is interpreted as an act on the woman's body, which stresses its possession by the man. The marking is part of the general status practice on the Balkans, both Christians and Muslims. The bride and the members of her family necessarily receive shoes as a present. They are accepted as a compensation for the loss of right on her children, who (as the woman herself) will become members of a different family. It is also reflected in the way in which the sex of the newly born baby is announced. For the parents of a girl it is: "Happy slippers."

The wearing of specific coverings on the women's feet are subject to strict rules. The foot of the woman can be at specific occasions open, not covered, but the space from the ankle to the knee is additionally

carefully covered under the skirts of the dress by the decorative cylindrical pieces of cloth (*kaltzi*) and by the new stockings. Most popular are the textile shoes. They are made of thick woolen material and are of different height – up to the knee (*kaltzuni*) or up to the ankle (*terlitzi*). In their wedding variant they are predominantly white (in some cases – red), decorated with red braids, and are worn necessarily until St. George day. Preserved until late and also preferred by the brides are the soft leather shoes resembling a stocking – *mesyovte*. They can be seen in medieval women's portraits with their characteristic red color, meaning a high status. The traditions in their production and use are well described. They are made of the special types of shoe





leathers, which at the end of the Second Bulgarian state were famous on Italian markets as *bulgaro*. With the coming of the Turks the new eastern form of the shoes appear – *paputzi*, *emenii*, *katuri*, *konduri*. The most widely spread and worn by the women are the shoes without a heel – *chehli*. This is aided by the fact that they can be used by all keeping the traditional rules, the unmarried women included. Most popular in contemporary conceptions and most elementary in form are the so-called *tzurvuli*. They are attached to the foot by specific tying and attachment to the ankle, which is determined by the terrain – one way for mountainous places and another for the plains. But their use by women is much more restricted.

The male means of covering the feet also form a layer of social communication, inherited from antiquity. In the Bulgarian heroic epics the leg “up to the knee” is one of the most popular parts of the body used to designate the male transition (by being swallowed by a chthonic creature – a snake, a dragon) and to mark actions and qualities connected with sexuality. The zone also directs towards the earth, towards the agricultural function, the social group of

the farmer, animal breeder, the craftsman in the tripartite European ideological model that has led to the creation of most of the ancient symbols of male clothing. All these layers explain the choice, the concentration of attention, of decorations, signs in the zone “up to the knee” in the traditional male costume.

Most primitive and most widely used and preserved until late are the white rectangular pieces of wool (flax), the so-called *navushta*, which wrap the legs up to the knees (rarely to the ankle) and attached by strings – black from goat hides, white from flax or from leather. They combine with the most primitive type of shoe (soul with strings), the so-called *tzurvuli*, with sharp or blunt points. The manner of wearing them is strictly determined by age. For the unmarried men there is a strict rule for binding the contrasting black strings – *cross-like*. Women stop to cross them and put them in circles. To be more elegant they use, as a finish to the general silhouette, the *kaltzuni* swen from thick woolen material (resembling boots) and



the *kaltzi* – without souls, like legs from the knee to the ankle, fastened with wire buttons. The Bulgarians wear additional decorations under the knees – woven belts. Red, multicolored, decorated with tassels and pendants, they are typical for the bridegroom and the young man in general.

On holidays women wear leather shoes, rarely boots. The right to wear shoes, like women, is received at the wedding and thus marks the family status of the man. Their made and their everyday use determine the life standard of their owner. For most people shoes are part of the festive clothing and the rule “*shoes are bought once in a lifetime*”. Despite the large production this part of the costume remains out of fashion trends and the processes of change. In traditional communities the most primitive and the most modern shoes are used to send messages that mark peaks in the life of a man, from the higher position of the married man to the priority of the well-to-do. In the process of disintegration of local costumes, signs on the feet of men are the last to survive.

TRADITIONAL HAIR STYLES AND HEAD DECORATIONS

As symbolically the most important part of the human body, the head is analogous to the soul, the spirit and the heavenly, with the male and the cultural as opposed to the material female nature. There is special attitude to its separate parts (the face and the hair) as symbols of physical strength and sexual maturity, of virtues and qualities of the personality.

The hair as a marker of world spaces in a mythological plan is also bearer of ancient messages, kept in traditional concepts – most commonly the connection with health and sexual potency of the woman. Thus it becomes one of her most characteristic signs. By plaiting/unplaiting, covering/uncovering of the hair one can demonstrate the position of the woman in/out of the status system and her

place in the social hierarchy. The exact fixing is achieved by means of special hair styles, shawls and head decorations. To be understood and interpreted they must be situated in the respective context. In traditional societies, which are societies of images, of models of behavior, there are signs generally accessible and effective. In the situation mentioned the costumes play the role of basic visual sign. It is predetermined by the fact that as different from all other objects, clothes are in permanent contact with man and by using them representatives of each group can easily classify themselves. The hair styles and the manner of tying the shawl also fix social roles, give signals for the responsibilities and thus regulate the set of social relations.

The care for the woman's hair starts from early age and finds expression in the general prohibition to cut it. The smaller girls do their hair in simpler plaits. They are parallel to their social time, characterized by more limited social events. The girls ready for marriage mark themselves by their uncovered hair in



combination with numerous plaits (sometimes up to 22). Their hair styles are difficult to achieve, with the specific thin plaits. They are complicated but easy to wear because the motives for doing them are not practical. The style of the hair is a clear sign.

The unmarried girls do not rely on what nature had given them. They use additional decorations, which increase the volume (respectively strength) of the hair, which speaks of the potency of its owner and makes additional impressions on the people around. The *kosichnik*, attached to the head and imitating natural hair is preferred, side by side with artificial plaits (always made from the hair of the girls herself);



woolen braids and strings; multicolored braids made from thread; strips of fabric stuck with small coins and beads. The decoration covers the back while the hair is always down to the waist, which adds to the general message. Also used are various woolen textile strips, mainly in red, with many beads, pompons, coins, snails, tufts of wool hanging by the ears, put as strips across the forehead or attached to the plaits. The hair and the accessories impress with the abundance of apotropaic objects. The hair, which is all uncovered, must be kept from *evel eyes*, envious or admiring, which consciously or unconsciously stimu-

lates ill-wishing forces and brings evil. That is why various combinations of strong, widely known apotropaic objects are put on – bright in color, with holes, shining, smelling and clinking objects. The aim is to distract the attention from the uncovered hair and to direct it to that part of the decoration, which can bear the bad eyes.

The girl who combines flowers with specific meaning (*kitka*) to decorate her head and thus to express her love for the young man, who steals them because he keeps her in his heart – this is the most well established demonstration of love in traditional aspect. In the love exchange the serious intentions are stressed. The flowers are taken from the left side and are put in the right side of the hat or the dress by the young man. The decoration is worn on the right by married people. This they give expression to feelings of clear marriage intentions. The live flowers (*kitka*) are included as an element borrowed from the wedding ritual, they embody it and direct towards it. Its ritual application (its relation to the *Arbor mundi*) is connected with the life process, the holy perfection, with glory and immortality.

The unmarried woman possesses still another festive decoration for the head – the peacock feather,



bearer of ancient mythical messages addressed to the sublime events in her life – the Lazarov day, the engagement and the wedding ceremony. In the time between them the feather of an ordinary poultry adds to the hair style as a semantic substitute. The expression that she is *under a feather* means that she is ready for marriage. The hair style and the decorations added to it are capable of making such an announcement about the readiness, the desire and the preferences of the girl. They give her an opportunity for a “conversation” on that topic with society. The fact that the sign is understood by the interpreter puts an end to the signification in the context of communication.

While the uncovered hair is a priority of the unmarried woman, there is strict prohibition for such actions for the married one. Even more, taking off the head cover and leaving the hair uncovered is equal, following the ritual law, to breaking the marriage. The covering of the woman's head until the middle of the 19th c., in some cases until the beginning of the 20th c. is performed with the characteristic “covering with a hat” replaced later by an ordinary covering. This is connected by scholars to the primeval two-horn hair style of the old Slavic culture, with aristocratic decorations, with the hats of the boyars in the Bulgarian Middle ages as a way to preserve the memory of old times after the imposition of the Ottoman rule. Stable data about this kind of head covering are offered by foreign travel notes about the Balkans of the 16th–18th c. It is also presented in the images of church donors of the 15th c. from the monastery churches in Dragalevtzi and Kremikovtzi – wives of wealthy traders and craftsmen. During the 14th and 15th c. similar women's hats are used also in Western Europe, but only two centuries later they are forgotten and cause surprise in the travelers with their decorations of embroidery and the brightness of the dress of the Bulgarian woman.

Looking for the origins of this head decoration one can establish impressive similarities in the outer appearance but what is more important, we are sure of its symbolic function – a sign of a married woman. There is a vast territory of distribution covering Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, and the people along the River Volga. Research concerning different regions direct us to deeply implanted mythical concepts. The specific form of the cylindrical (tower-like) and conus-like (one-horn) hats is interpreted as a symbol of the Great Mother Goddess (the Scythian goddess). It stresses on sexual potency, connection with the life cycle and the Goddess Ishtar. The





bird hats or the two-horn head covers are comparable to horned female gods of fertility. Thus it becomes clear that in their diversity they have been created as signs of belonging to separate clans and tribal groups. There are also cultural influences, but the hats and the hair covers with married women to distinguish their group is mythological and thus also social and symbolic which is something fundamental in Bulgarian traditional culture and probably not only in it.

The "covering with a hat" marks an important



moment in the life of the woman. Because of its social importance it is always public and with a special rituals, most often immediately after taking off the bridal veil. The married woman, whose only advantage is being "known – recognized" by society, is signified by special solemn signs of the clothing. Such is the luxurious royal decoration for the head of the Bulgarian woman, her "symbolic profit". In its representative function the female hat, covered with coins, demonstrates accurately the financial well-being of the family and the peak reached in the social hierarchy.

Depending on age and the status of the woman separate elements of the head covering and the hair style may undergo changes. The first to disappear after the wedding is the *kosichnik*. After the birth of one or two children the hair style becomes simpler. The pad in covering the head becomes more elementary. But even



in a simplified form, the covering with a hat just described is used till the end of life and is an obligatory element of the burial dress. Entering the group of old women is marked by a special very simplified sign, which clearly shows the new role in society. Old women take minimal part in social life and their sign consists in covering the hair completely and even parts of the face. Their preparation for the transition they express by hiding or covering their heads thus distinguishing themselves from the others.

The Bulgarian man has his hair neatly cut, he is clean shaved and with well-formed mustach, with a fur hat on his head – this is the traditional image of the middle aged man in the prime of his life. All deviation from this norm signalizes an abnormal life situation, for example mourning, when he is unshaven and without a hat. The cutting of the hair is obligatory since it shows the male principle – women never cut their hair. That is why the first division of the sexes is performed with the act of the hair cut, the so called *strizhba*. It is made *crosslike* – at three, five, eight places, primarily by the bestman (sometimes his



wife, the father, the mother, a boy whose parents are alive) and is always connected by visits of guests, presents, greetings. The sense of all this is "to recognize the child as the lawful successor of the father and a member of society." By cutting the man's hair, as different from the woman's, a special hair style is formed. From the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th c. this style is described in ethnographic papers as a male plait and hair cut round it. Gradually this way of cutting the hair is connected with old men and remains only in the memories of informants and is long forgotten.

The main attention is shifted from the man's hair to the hairs of his beard. It is stressed during the first shaving of the bridegroom, an expression of a desire for a numerous family. Shaving is taken as a sign for the beginning of sexual life of the married man and for that reason is not done before marriage, while the end of "male strength" is marked by growing a long beard. The growing of a beard by the old man is done in a ritual way (at the age of 60–70). All relatives and friends are present. This marks his new place and role. By shaving the man is able to show his belonging to the group of the most active men, which does not include the bachelors and the old men (yet and already). The traditional image of the Bulgarian man

contains one single stable element, the moustach. They owe much to them, they even swear in them.

To be bearheaded is unpermissible for the man. Probably the idea of a limit imposes strict observance of the rules and turns the hat into a clothing with exceptionally magic power. In the 19th c. the head is covered with a fur hat (*kalpak*), rarely a felt hat. Until the Liberation this is the city fess or the red fabric (*saruk*) wrapped round a felt bottom. The special towel (*peshkirche*) is used during work and even during holidays. The shepherd's clothing also uses the shawl described as *a girdle for the head and the hood* made of one piece, tied under the beard with woolen strings. Probably the oldest male head covers (*sciallo* and *kukullis*). No doubt priority is given to the use of the hat by sheep skin, the so-called *kalpak*, with the fur closely cut on the outside and fur lining inside. The second protective layer under it is formed by using a small woolen hat – the *podkapnik*.

As part of the costume, male hats perform their function to protect the man and to present him. Not so much aesthetically but rather as a social position held in the community. Traditionally wearing a hat is connected with the quality and the results of the work done and industriousness in general. Entering pre-marital age is marked by a specific form given to the male hat. Especially important for the village community is the use of a distinctive sign for marital status and the possibility to signal readiness for marriage and marriage preferences. This is the theme of most intensive communication. Central position in self-expression and communication, both for men and for women, is given to head decorations including the bunch (*kitka*) of fresh flowers or dry flowers, the analogical wreath and the peacock feather. The unmarried man leaves his hat protruding and with its top pressed and this distinguishes him from the married men with whom the bottom is tucked down. They also wear it tilted to one side – for that purpose they attach a chain, attach it on the right side and stick it at the back to the hair.

Strange and wonderful, the local peculiarities of the male and female hair styles, hats, head covers and decorations are only seemingly confusing with



their diversity. As an important part of traditional costumes they complete the creation of a set of signs, subjected to one and the same rules, a specific language understood and used in Bulgarian ethnic territory.

CONVERSATION WITHOUT WORDS

The formation of signs in the male and female traditional costume can be grouped round several basic principles. They are realized by the idea about completeness in dressing as equal to social completeness. In the first place there is the idea of a complex including all kinds of dresses worn in the traditional community within the space of the costume thus creating the horizontal level. The right to wear each of the elements of the dress – shirt, upper dress, is received by passing to the next higher level of social hierarchy. Its acquisition marks the first socialization – with a shirt (after christening the child), entering fertile age

– with the upper dress (the clothing separated according to sex), the marital status – with the overcoat (you have it or you don't). United in one combination they symbolize the limit, the highest social position. For the woman this is her becoming a wife and a mother, for the man – his becoming head of the family and later head of the house (the alderman of the family). The simultaneous use of several dresses – shirts, aprons, belts, upper clothes, demonstrates overdressing, oversignification. As a social marker each of the elements rests on mythical concepts about the structure of the cosmos which he transforms into concepts about social order and norms of social behavior. Mythical signs are reinterpreted as social. Thus the text of the costume for each status group is created.

A second basic principle in signifying with traditional clothing is the layering of the decorations – from the shirt to the upper dress, from the decorations for the head to the covers for the feet. It concerns abundant presence or absence of the red color, of bright materials, of embroidered and textile ornaments and additional tassels, pompons, pendants or

respect with the older children. The tradition in layering, as well as the attempts at volume and completeness follow perfectly and demonstrate the scheme of sexual status “not yet – yes already – yes still – already no”.

The third principle includes the stress on three major zones in the costume composition along the vertical line (head, waist, legs) by adding some elements which today would be called accessories. Signs are created expressing readiness for marriage or state of marriage. The hair (part of it or all of it) with the unmarried is freely demonstrated, by a special hair style and additional textile decorations or under the tilted hat. It is necessarily covered (sometimes with two hats) with the married men and marked by specific covers (several shawls and a hat) with their wives. At the waist we have an opposition of the multicolored narrow belt with tassels and pendants (unique for young girls, additional for the young boys) and the wide girdle, the metal belt with *pafti* for those married. Round the legs the distinction is covered/bare feet with the women; *tzurvuli* with special croosed of the ties against leather shoes. The accents are the strongest with the young

married woman (*young bride*) in the period of her greatest activity “till the birth of one, two, children.” With men attention is focused on marking his readiness for marriage, on the period of conquering the woman and setting up a family.

As a social sign the costume is so well established that the slightest deviation gives opportunities

to mark the transition, the complete lack of any status, like during mourning or with the young mother. This is achieved by turning the clothes inside out (reversing the order), with destroying the decoration or a temporary removal of the signs in the three

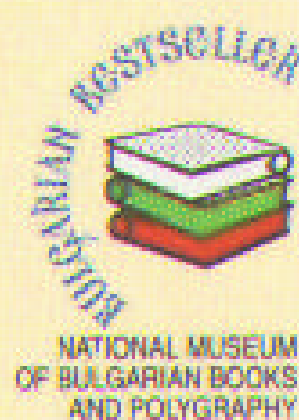
metal (from old coins to jewels). Both for the man and for the woman these are signs marking the reproductive abilities corresponding to degrees of maturity and the various types of sexual behavior allowed. The decoration, entirely missing or scanty with the children, drastically increases with those ready for marriage. Most abundant is it with the young woman and the young married man, which proves their importance for the community. The decoration disappears with the old man and the old woman, equal in this



zones – hat, girdle, apron, shoes, letting loose of the woman's hair, growing a beard by men. All situations are based on the idea that dresses cover the body – the natural, and turns it into social. The man hidden in his dress leaves the mythically alien, the non-cultural and becomes a social person, a product of culture. The reverse action brings things back.

For a long time the clothing of the Bulgarian in conditions of foreign oppression is under the influence of a behavior based on obedience. In this sense the government helped for its unification, imposing restrictions on the signs of social status. The heritage is a hampered communication "outwards", in clothing included. Normally the most important signifying resources, connected with social belonging and consist of symbols of social rank in the Bulgarian traditional costume appear at a later stage. This explains why they are so desired later on when a new language, the language of fashion comes into use... Valid even today under the overpowering rule *to be like everybody else*, but preserved together with the mysterious nodding of the head, understood only in his community and opposite to all "foreign" yes.





BULGARIAN DIPLOMATIC REVIEW

EDITORIAL BOARD

Maya Nyagholova
Iva Nikolova
Simeon Vassilev
Stoyan Raichevsky
Prof. Dr. Todor Shopov

Editor-in-Chief
Julliana Tomova

Editor
Vassilka Shishkova

Graphic Design
Konstantin Radoslavov

Translation
Maya Pencheva

Desktop Publishing
Galya Gerassimova

BULGARIAN DIPLOMATIC REVIEW

is an edition of Bulgarian Bestseller
Company – National Museum of the
Bulgarian Book and Poligraphy

Editorial and Advertising Office

Sofia 1700 Vitosha Residential District
Emanuil Popdimitrov Str. bl.1 entr. B apt.11
Tel. 962 59 46, 62 21 08
Fax 962 57 64
e-mail: diplomatic@abv.bg
www.diplomatic-bg.com